



MINNESOTA COUNCIL  
ON FOUNDATIONS

# Rural Urban Bridging for Impact: Discovery and Design Process

**Progress Report**

**August 2024**

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# Rural Urban Bridging for Impact (RUBI) North Star Statement

## **Vision: Belonging**

Minnesotans across our broad geographies, differing identities, and rich cultural histories experience a sense of belonging and interdependence.

## **Outcome: Bridging**

Minnesotans have the skills, knowledge, and experience to connect and build bridges, nurturing safety and inclusion in the face of marginalization and across differences in rural and urban perspectives.

## **Role of Philanthropy: Actively Supporting**

We are active, authentic, and engaged participants in funding, learning, connecting, and convening to encourage greater belonging. We use our diverse resources to support the self-determination, well-being, and collective good of our communities.

## **Introduction and Organizing**

At the October 2022 Minnesota Council on Foundations CEO Retreat, an idea took hold around the need for philanthropy to advance rural and urban bridge building. Repa Mekha, President and CEO of Nexus Community Partners came away feeling called to action and invited others to continue the conversations.

That December, a group of MCF members began exploring next steps. They focused on how philanthropy can play a leadership role in uniting Minnesotans across differences, especially rural and urban geography, through shared learning and collective impact. Together, they recognized that philanthropy is well positioned to play the roles of convener and bridge builder to create an aspirational vision that unites Minnesotans across differences, especially rural and urban geography. These discussions led to the recommendation that MCF develop a project dubbed RUBI (Rural Urban Bridging for Impact).

The Bush Foundation and the McKnight Foundation provided funding to support the project's launch. In early 2023, a steering committee of 19 representatives from MCF member organizations representing the diversity of foundation types and geographies was recruited to lead the process of discovery, design, and community engagement. MCF served as the administrative hub. MCF retained consultants to facilitate the process and provided support staff in coordinating steering committee activities.

Six potential outcomes were identified and guided the steering committee's work throughout this first year:

- Learning opportunities to strengthen philanthropy's role in promoting urban/rural interdependence, including practice and evaluation tools
- Strategic connections to new institutional and community partnerships
- Data and guidance to inform and evaluate rural funding needs and strategies
- Resources for philanthropic thought leadership and awareness raising, including narrative change
- Opportunities for collective action, including legislative advocacy and pooled funds
- Optimizing philanthropy's unique role as a convener and broker of non-partisan community building

## Co-Creation Process

The steering committee committed to guiding a process that would result in Minnesota philanthropy being equipped to strengthen Minnesota by promoting urban/rural interdependence and reducing urban/rural divide. The steering committee held an organizational meeting in May 2023. The focus was on deepening relationships, identifying potential outcomes, and surfacing knowledge gaps.

### Learning Sessions

Among its first decisions, the steering committee proposed developing a series of learning sessions to ensure that all committee members were working with baseline information. Ultimately, during this first year, the steering committee hosted seven learning sessions on the following topics. Many of these sessions were initially hosted solely for steering committee members; latter sessions were hosted for all MCF members to attend. Recordings of these sessions are available online: <https://mcf.org/rubi-resources>.

- Perceptions of civic language including commonly used words such as liberty, diversity, and racial justice
- The history and current strategies around rural and urban community and economic development
- A demographic look at Minnesota's economy
- The state of hate, extremism, and anti-government movements in Minnesota
- A rural sociologist's analysis of rural narratives in Minnesota and ways to formulate narrative change strategies
- An overview of the concepts of othering and belonging as they relate to social bonding or breaking
- An overview of various strategies for bridging across difference

## *Individual Interviews*

In July, facilitator Lisa Fisher from The Giving Practice was invited into the project to support the group's ongoing efforts to co-create its vision, goals, and activities.

Lisa's work began with individual interviews with each participant with the intention of learning more about how each participant understood the work and their goals for the project. The areas explored through these interviews included the following:

- Reasons participants wanted to participate in RUBI
- Participant hopes for the long-term difference philanthropy might make through this effort
- What opportunities and challenges they believe exist for the group
- Areas of resonance for the preliminary learning goals
- Relevant change models to help guide the work
- What success might look like by the end of the first phase of the effort

From these individual interviews, themes were surfaced and shared back to the full group at the September steering committee meeting, where participants discussed the themes and began to formulate plans for future action. Both the themes from the individual interviews and from the group's discussion of the themes helped to chart a path forward for the RUBI effort, providing relevant areas for exploration and discussion in future group sessions.

## *Group Discovery and Design Process*

The group held its second in-person meeting in October 2023 in Brooklyn Center. At that session, group members who attended the October 2022 CEO Retreat shared their reflections on that initial catalyst for the RUBI effort. The group also reviewed and discussed some of the relevant change models they had suggested during the interviews. In groups, attendees explored how to best refine the RUBI outcomes and strategies and engaged in an exercise to identify potential barriers, ways to address the barriers, and mini experiments that could be attempted to further learning.

A virtual meeting also held in October was devoted to building on four key areas of work identified earlier in the fall: 1) clarify the group's "North Star," 2) build and deepen the group's knowledge of othering/belonging work, 3) define and locate "success stories," and 4) determine possible narrative change activities in which the group could engage. The group also deepened its understanding of the Waters of Systems Change (Six Conditions of Systems Change) a model for understanding how systems change work happens.

In November, the group worked to frame the RUBI effort through the Waters of Systems Change model in order to develop a collective vision for the RUBI effort and proposed areas of action moving forward.

In December, the group met in-person at the Lower Sioux Indian Community near Morton. The group spent the first portion of the meeting learning from Teresa Peterson, Utuhu Cistinna Win, who is Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota and a citizen of the Upper Sioux Community. She read from and discussed her book *Voices from Pejuhutazizi: Dakota Stories and Storytellers*, highlighting the relevance and power of storytelling. Participants also worked together to map any current rural-urban bridging work of which they were aware. Finally, the group refined the RUBI vision and goals and discussed possible action steps to realize the vision and goals moving forward.

In January 2024, group members reviewed and discussed the mapping exercise results, the work on the North Star statement accomplished earlier, and the short, medium, and long-term actions the group had identified to pursue. Additionally, after the meeting, participants were asked to collect feedback from colleagues in their organizations on the revised North Star statement and short, medium, and long-term actions so that the feedback could be incorporated into a revised version of the North Star statement and action plans.

In January 2024, the group held its fourth in-person session at the Stearns History Museum in St. Cloud. To connect to the local community, the group heard from Greta Stark-Kraker and Hudda Ibrahim from the Central Minnesota Community Foundation. Through its previous work, the steering committee also identified four key areas of action for moving forward: 1) Ongoing learning for philanthropy, 2) Blueprint for action (“Bridging Field Guide”), 3) Finding and funding what works, and 4) Narrative change/storytelling. The Minnesota Council on Foundations committed to carrying forward the work related to the ongoing learning for philanthropy and the development of the blueprint for action with input provided by the committee. As a result, the committee decided to focus its action planning on the areas of “finding and funding what works” and “narrative change/storytelling.” The bulk of the meeting was focused on framing specific action plans for each of these two areas.

Though this meeting was to have been the final session for the steering committee, the group determined more time together was needed to plan for future action before expanding RUBI to become a larger network of MCF members.

Between various Steering Committee meetings, members engaged in the learning sessions, highlighted in the section above. Each of the learning sessions added to the depth of knowledge of committee members, and helped to focus ongoing and future work proposed by the committee.

In April, the committee deepened the conversations and built on the action plans in the areas of “finding and funding what works” and “narrative change/storytelling”. Additionally, MCF shared a progress update for launching RUBI as a broader MCF member network. The network would focus on offering ongoing learning for philanthropy and on the development of a blueprint for action. MCF also reported that a new staff member was hired to support RUBI’s work as it shifted into its next phase.

In early May, the steering committee discussed the structure and leadership of RUBI going forward and on action planning for the “narrative change/storytelling” focus area. The steering committee also met Dave Anderson, the newly-hired MCF Manager of Policy and Partnerships who would support the RUBI effort moving forward.

The final session of the steering committee was held later in May 2024 at the McKnight Foundation. Laura Salvesson, McKnight’s Director of Facilities and Guest Services and previously the Director of the Mill City Museum for the Minnesota Historical Society, provided a historical tour of the building and area in which the McKnight Foundation is located. Additionally, building on its work from December, the group began to identify potential opportunities for future work through a mapping and action planning exercise centered on two areas of focus: “finding and funding what works” and “narrative change/storytelling.”

Beginning in June 2024, the Rural-Urban Bridging for Impact initiative would broaden from a 19-person Steering Committee to an inclusive network, open to all members of MCF. Thus concluded a year of discovery and design and the work of RUBI continued in a new format hereafter.

## The Path Forward

### *Areas of Focus*

Over the course of the time the steering committee worked together, four key areas surfaced as focal points for moving the work forward.

- 1) Engaging in ongoing learning for philanthropy
- 2) Finding and funding what works
- 3) Developing and distributing a “Blueprint for Action” (“Bridging Field Guide”)
- 4) Narrative change/storytelling

These four focus areas will be carried forward in various ways. Initial plans include the following ideas:

- 1) Engaging in ongoing learning for philanthropy: MCF will host a RUBI network, open to all MCF members, which will guide the planning and hosting of various MCF member briefings and workshops.
- 2) Finding and funding what works: In addition to offering sessions for learning from external guests, the RUBI network will provide a space for peer sharing/learning, where members can explore what’s working in community.
- 3) Developing a “Blueprint for Action”: MCF has contracted with Seiche Consulting to review all steering committee minutes and videos in order to develop a Blueprint for Action. The Blueprint will be housed on a mini website with resource materials that grantmakers can pick up and

implement in areas of storytelling (narrative change), relationship building (bridging and belonging), building new skillsets (civic leadership), and shifting structures (systems change). The Blueprint will serve as a Call to Action for grantmakers to engage in the work of RUBI within their organizations and communities.

4) Narrative change/storytelling: The blueprint referenced above will share examples of what has worked in similar settings to change narratives through stories that shatter preconceived understandings of urban and rural geographies.

## *A Network for Long-Term Action*

The important work of RUBI will continue.

As RUBI shifts into its next phase, it is shifting into an MCF member network with the guidance and support of Dave Anderson, MCF Manager of Policy and Partnerships. The network will allow RUBI to expand its membership to include others, as well as set up a small “kitchen cabinet” of individuals to provide input and feedback. If you are interested in connecting with this work, please reach out to Dave Anderson, [danderson@mcf.org](mailto:danderson@mcf.org).

## **Thank You**

MCF thanks **Lisa Fisher**, The Giving Practice and **Diana Anderson**, BRIDGE Strategies Consulting, for significant contributions to this report and to the launch of RUBI. Thank you, as well, to the members of the RUBI steering committee, who dedicated significant time and thoughtfulness to the launch of this initiative.

## *Steering Committee Members*

- Aaron Zimmerman, Executive Director, PFund Foundation
- Anita Patel, Vice President of Grantmaking, Bush Foundation
- Anna Wasescha, President, West Central Initiative
- Ben Goldfarb, Director of Program Alignment, The McKnight Foundation
- Cynthia Bauerly, Public Policy Executive in Residence, Women's Foundation of Minnesota
- Ellen Squires, Research Officer, Blandin Foundation
- Jennifer Woodford, President, Rochester Area Foundation
- JoAnn Birkholz, Foundation Director, Medica Foundation
- John E. Larsen, President, John Larsen Foundation
- Karen White, President & CEO, Northwest Minnesota Foundation



- Kevin Walker, President & CEO, Northwest Area Foundation
- Melanie Hoffert, Chief Marketing Officer, Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation
- Morgan Kinross-Wright, Vice President of Community Relations, Land O'Lakes and Exec. Director, Land O' Lakes Foundation
- Nancy Fasching, Vice President, Community Impact, Southwest Initiative Foundation
- Repa Mekha, President & CEO, Nexus Community Partners
- Steve Joul, President & CEO, CommunityGiving
- Terri Foster, Executive Director, Brainerd Lakes Area Community Foundation
- Terri Thao, Program Director, Local Initiatives and Opportunities, Margaret A Cargill Philanthropies